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SUBJECT: IRAN COMPLAINS OF BURDEN OF AFGHAN IMMIGRANTS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence
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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S) Summary: Iranian officials frequently complain that the influx of illegal Afghan immigrants into Iran since the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan broke out in 2001 creates an economic burden that Iran can no longer bear. At a conference on immigrants in April, Iranian government officials said that Afghans make up 91% of the refugee population in Iran. Iranian officials dispute UNHCR figures of Afghan immigrants at close to 1 million, claiming that Iran plays host to roughly 3 million Afghans. It calculates the cost to the country at \$2 day each, or \$6 million a day, and calls UNHCR's grant to Iran of a \$1 million per annum grossly inadequate. An Iranian who until recently worked for UNICEF in Iran said that illegal Afghan immigrants, once deported, promptly return via Sistan va Baluchestan province in southeastern Iran. Some provincial officials have decided to take matters into their own hands. As of June 21, Gilan province in northern Iran will reportedly ban Afghan citizens from working and traveling in its borders. End Summary.

UN recognition

2.(U) January 2008 UNHCR figures put the Afghan population in Iran at 894,000, second only to Pakistan as a host. Officials from the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP) praised Iran in June for its assistance to Afghan refugees. IRNA reported June 17 that UNHCR representative in Iran Carlos Zaccagnini as said, "We respect the grave burden shouldered by the Iranian government...Unfortunately, we could not fulfill our promises but the international community is serious to render more aid to Iran...Iran's actions in dealing with the issue of refugees, especially the Afghans, are very admirable." Zaccagnini urged UNHCR to give Iran more assistance. Separately, Fars News reported June 16 that WFP Regional Director for the Middle East and Central Asia Naila Sabra told Iranian press in Rome, "I personally thank the Iranian government for accepting over one million Afghan refugees into the country...We have long been witnessing humanitarian efforts graciously made by Iran to help its neighbors."

Real number of Afghans?

3.(U) Iran's envoy to the Food and Agriculture Organization told the WFP that more than 97% of Afghan refugees in Iran are not covered by the WFP food assistance program because they live outside official migrant camps where aid agencies can access them, as reported by Fars News June 14. He said that out of the more than 1 million Afghan refugees in Iran, fewer than 27,000 Afghan refugees live in camps. He noted that severe droughts and rising global food prices have put refugees living outside of camps throughout the world, including in Iran, in a vulnerable position.

4.(U) Counting both legal and illegal Afghan residents in Iran, then Iranian Interior Minister Pourmohammadi told an immigration conference in April that more than 3 million Afghan nationals live in Iran, some of whom have been in Iran three decades. He said that "international organizations do not offer real help for solving the problems of these immigrants in Iran." Pourmohammadi claimed that of the \$12 million allocated by the UN to assist Afghan refugees in Iran annually, only \$1 million is given to the Iranian government and the remainder is used to cover the cost of UN offices in Iran.

5.(U) Director-General of the Foreign Ministry's department for foreign nationals and refugees affairs, Taqi Qaemi, was quoted in press saying that UNHCR's \$1 million assistance is grossly inadequate, when one considers that at a very minimum, Iran spends \$2 per refugee, per day, times 3 million Afghans - resulting in a daily \$6 million dollar price tag.

6.(U) Qaemi said that 91% of refugees in Iran are from Afghanistan. He claimed that the high influx of refugees has resulted in a host of problems for Iran, in addition to the economic burden, including: "illegal" marriages, orphaned children, and the trafficking of drugs, humans, and weapons.

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Greater crackdowns

7.(S) An Iranian who until recently worked for UNICEF to establish "health posts" and literacy programs for Afghan refugees claimed that Iran started cracking down on illegal immigrants after it did not receive promised additional funding from the UN. She said the refugee issue puts politicians in a difficult position as immigrants are seen as "eating up" money that could go to nationals. Another reason for greater crackdowns and increased deportations, surmised the former UN employee, could be Ahmadinejad himself. While serving as Tehran mayor, she said, he took a harder stance on immigration -- firing Afghan refugees working as janitors in Tehran municipality because he wanted the jobs to go to unemployed Iranians.

8.(S) A June 17 report from Fars News claimed that 103 illegal Afghans were rounded up in Sistan-va Baluchestan in 24 hours but did not say whether they would be deported. The former UNICEF employee said that once deported, illegal Afghan immigrants often return to Iran via the border of the southeastern Sistan va Baluchestan province.

9.(U) Gilan province (located on the Caspian Sea) has reportedly decided to try to ban Afghans. According to Fars News, the Director General of the Gilan province Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs Hamidreza Mohebbi recently announced that all residency permits and identity cards for Afghans in Gilan will be invalid as of June 21. He added that Gilan "will be one of the provinces in which Afghan citizens are barred from living or traveling." (Note: We have seen nothing to indicate whether such a rule can be implemented or whether other provinces are following suit. Endnote). "Due to permanent nature of the ban on the presence of Afghans in Gilan province, all managers particularly, real estate agents, employers and contractors should refrain from any dealings related to property

rentals and employment," said Mohebbi.

Better workers

10.(S) Despite Ahmadinejad's desire to employ more Iranians, an Iranian construction business owner in Tehran said he preferred Afghan laborers because they are better workers. The businessman dismissed as negligible the impact of rising labor costs associated with the deportation of Afghan laborers in the construction sector (reftel). While his labor costs have increased by 20% due to the expulsions of Afghans, he said this increase is minuscule compared to skyrocketing costs of construction materials.

11.(S) The contractor, who only works in Tehran, was also dismissive of enforcement of labor laws. He said the Ministry of Labor is the only entity that has the jurisdiction to control work permits while Afghans are physically on a construction site. While the ministry sometimes will fine companies employing illegal Afghans, they often accept bribes to overlook illegal workers. The police, he added, can only "hassle" illegal immigrants when they are not at work.

12.(C) Comment: As Iran's economy continues to decline, and oil and food costs rise, the costs of supporting a large refugee population will continue to climb, and Iran is likely to continue to try to expel Afghan refugees. If Gilan province is actually successful in driving out all Afghans, as impossible as that sounds, it is possible that other provinces could follow suit. It is noteworthy that Iranian officials included illegal immigration as a top concern that they would like to discuss in its recent proposed package to the P5+1 for constructive negotiations.

BURNS